

**Review of Lee Gatiss, “The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*.**

**BY David Allen.**

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Lee Gatiss takes us on a tour of the Synod of Dort, and an informative tour it is. Gatiss’ chapter is one of the most important in the book. It is judicious, well-footnoted with primary and secondary sources, and clearly and engagingly written.

The chapter lucidly demonstrates three truths, one or more of which have been and continue to be ignored or denied by many in the Reformed tradition. First, there were some Calvinists present at the Synod who clearly affirmed that Christ died for the sins of all men. Second, the final Dortian Canons were worded in such a way so as not to exclude this position within orthodox Reformed doctrine. Third, early 17th century Reformed theology on the question of the extent of the atonement was not monolithic by any stretch of the imagination.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Part one considers the historical context of Dort (144-47). Gatiss states his intention is to “put the Synod into historical context and note some of the diversity among the delegates” (144). He succeeds in doing so quite well in a three page summary.

Part two addresses specifically the Canons of Dort on the death of Christ (147-58). Gatiss rightly takes note of the fact that the Remonstrants were allowed to attend the early meetings of the Synod, but were dismissed in January over their “political posturing and obstructive maneuvering” (148). Nevertheless, Gatiss thinks the Remonstrants “were given a fair hearing” at the Synod.

Gatiss does note that Balcanquhall “did at times complain about their [Remonstrants] treatment at the hands of some delegates,” but he attempts to brush this aside by stating that the Arminian opinions were well known matters of public record. I think one will find that the record of what occurred at Dort indicates a fair amount of “political posturing and obstructive maneuvering” by the delegates as well. Here I think Gatiss’ chapter needs some historical counter-balance from Arminian scholars.

Gatiss next discusses the debates on the atonement’s sufficiency and efficacy (the Lombardian formula), and the diversity of Reformed responses to the Arminian employment of the formula.

Gatiss thinks the Arminian position on sufficiency takes the first part of the Lombardian formula and “pushes it further.” I don’t see how this can be the case since the original intention of the Lombardian formula was to express the fact of Christ’s death for the sins of all people, an intention which was in the process of being reinterpreted by many in the Reformed tradition to support definite atonement.

Gatiss states:

Not only was the cross sufficient but it was actually effective in paying for each and every person, and indeed was designed by God to do so. . . . Thus the Arminian position on the atonement made an explicit claim not just about its extent but also about its purpose and intention in God’s will (150).

But the Arminian statement Gatiss quotes says nothing about God’s intention in the atonement with respect to its efficacy. It is certainly true that the Arminian position was that Christ died with an equal intent to save all people, and this point all delegates at Dort disagreed with. All the Arminian statement, which Gatiss quotes, affirms is that God willed or purposed that the death of Christ, with respect to its extent, should be for the sins of all men, and it was this point that some of the delegates at Dort were in agreement with.

Furthermore, the final Canon on this point (Article II.3) which Gatiss quotes stated: “This death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sins, and is of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world” (150). The operative word here is “sufficient.” The majority of the delegates interpreted it to mean sufficient only in value to have paid the price for the sins of the whole world, but it in fact did not do so (definite atonement). Other delegates, like Davenant, interpreted sufficiency to mean that Christ’s death actually did pay for the sins of all men. The language is deliberately ambiguous to permit both groups to sign.

Gatiss correctly points out that Article V places “the abundant sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice side by side with the necessity for indiscriminate evangelism, but without explicitly making a logical connection between them” (151-52). Gatiss then states that the delegates all concurred that those who are ultimately lost have no one to blame but themselves.

This was certainly their statement, but as I have argued elsewhere, it is logically inconsistent and even incoherent to make this claim on the definite atonement scheme for the simple reason that nothing can be sufficient for someone (the non-elect) when it does not exist for them, or function as the grounds for the indiscriminate offer of the gospel to them. But that is a discussion for another time.

Gatiss turns to discuss the intentional efficacy of the atonement. He states: “So the Synod said, more carefully, that the cross was somehow sufficient for all, but only intended to be efficacious for the elect” (154).

Under the sub-heading “Reformed Variations,” Gatiss explains the British and Bremen delegations’ minority reports to the Synod on the question of extent. While agreeing with the special intention of the atonement for the elect, the British also argued that Christ “died for all, that all and every one by means of faith might obtain remission of sins, and eternal life by virtue of that ransom.” In other words, Christ died conditionally for all but efficaciously only for the elect.

Gatiss speaks of Martinius, one of the Bremen delegates, as holding “Arminianizing opinions” and “inclined toward Remonstrant views” on the atonement (155). Martinius would find this humorous, I suspect, since he clearly rejected Arminianism, as did all the delegates at Dort. If one speaks of Martinius’ views as “Arminianizing,” then he would have to do the same for Davenant and the British delegation, along with the Bremen delegation, since they all affirmed a form of hypothetical universalism. The only place hypothetical universalism agrees with Arminianism is on the specific question of the extent of the atonement: Christ actually substituted for the sins of all people. Gatiss’ use of the label is at best uncharitable and at worst, historically false.

Gatiss thinks the final Canons don’t necessarily reflect British counterweight to Genevan dislike for the concept of a sufficiency whereby Christ died conditionally for all. I’m not so sure. Gatiss does state: “Without the British pressing the Synod on these points the Canons may perhaps not have been so carefully stated” (157). I think this accurately expresses the situation.

Following Jonathan Moore, Gatiss asserts: “Article II.8 affirmed that God ‘willed that Christ . . . should effectually (efficaciter) redeem . . . all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen,’ but this left a back door open for Davenant and others by not technically denying an ultimately ineffectual universal redemption in addition to this” (157).

Such a statement either fails to understand Davenant’s position or unnecessarily questions his whole-hearted approval of the Canons witnessed by his own signature. No “technicality” was needed. This is precisely what Davenant believed and wrote about clearly. Davenant, along with all the other hypothetical universalists at Dort, needed no “back door” to sign the Canons in good faith.

Gatiss’ third section covers matters “After the Synod” and focuses on the Dutch Annotations and their treatment of four key texts: Isaiah 53:10-12, John 3:16, 1 John 2:2, and 1 Timothy 2:1-6. He concludes: “that there was careful exegetical work standing behind the doctrinal formulations of the Synod” (162).

Gatiss notes the Dutch Annotations echoed the Heidelberg Catechism, speaking of Christ's death in these terms: "when the heavy wrath of God for the sins of mankind lay upon him," and that Christ "suffered so much for mankind" (160).

In his conclusion, Gatiss rightly notes 1) the Canons carefully left certain questions undecided, 2) Davenant espoused a form of Hypothetical Universalism, and 3) the British delegation's hypothetical universalism exerted some influence on the Synod (162-63).

Also noted is the fact that Richard Baxter strongly affirmed his commitment to the Canons of Dort, despite the fact that he held to an unlimited substitution for sins in Christ's death. This is further evidence of the elasticity of Dort's final statement on the issue.

In addition to the slightly biased statement on Martinius above, one might infer a smidgeon of bias in this statement in Gatiss' final paragraph. "Despite disagreements with other delegations, Davenant and Ward happily subscribed to the original pristine statement of 'five-point Calvinism'" (163). I find the use of the word "pristine" interesting.

A final note on Gatiss' final sentence: "The question, however, must be whether he [Richard Baxter] or Hypothetical Universalists today are as careful to avoid the slippery slope of Arminianism as the British at Dort were, and whether the Reformed are as willing now as they were at Dort to tolerate a certain amount of diversity within their robust internal debates" (163).

Perhaps Gatiss should have added to this slippery-slope comment the danger of "hyper-Calvinism" on the part of high-Calvinists, since such is certainly historically warranted, and as he himself notes, according to Michael Thomas, there were two delegations "foreshadowing 'Hyper-Calvinism'" in their backing away from the notion of the obligation to evangelize everyone (151).

All in all, this is a very helpful chapter. Were I to choose only one chapter in this section to recommend all on both sides of the aisle to read, it would probably be Gatiss' chapter, though either of the next two on Amyraut and John Owen would be a close second.